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**Combating psychological harassment in the workplace:**

**Processes for management intervention**

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## **Combating psychological harassment in the workplace: Processes for management intervention**

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the process whereby an individual at work is singled out and victimised. This phenomenon, named ‘psychological harassment’, is defined in terms of four interrelated phases: (1) antecedents interaction, (2) harassment behaviour, (3) responses of the victim and the organisation, (4) individual, organisational and societal effects. To help managers combat psychological harassment in the workplace, the paper proposes intervention processes based on the analysis of a single case study. An intervention tool, consisting of four diagnostic questions, is proposed to help managers: (1) identify psychological harassment behaviour, (2) decide whether to act or not, (3) develop a psychological harassment management process, and/or (4) develop a psychological harassment prevention process. The paper argues managers may effectively combat psychological harassment in the workplace when they utilise the proposed tool and consider carefully the implications of intervention.

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, psychological harassment and bullying at work has received considerable attention across the world and has emerged as a new field of study in Europe, Australia, South Africa and the United States (Hoel, Rayner and Cooper 1999; Kiesecker and Marchant 1999; McCarthy, Rylance, Bennett and Zimmerman 2001; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel and Vartia 2003; Vega and Comer 2005). Much of the research to date has revealed the nature and prevalence of bullying at work (Hoel, Cooper and Faragher 2001; State Services Authority 2006), developed various process models to capture the key antecedents, behaviours and effects involved (Di Martino, Hoel and Cooper 2003; Salin 2003; Poilpot-Rocaboy 2006), and on the basis of this accumulated knowledge, proposed a variety of strategies to deal with this counterproductive behaviour (Bland and Stalcup 2001; Glendinning 2001; Merchant and Hoel 2003; Poilpot-Rocaboy and Bonafons 2005).

Despite these theoretical and practical contributions, employees continue to experience psychological harassment on a day-to-day basis. A 2006 survey of 13,219 employees in 149 public sector organisations in the state of Victoria, Australia, found that 'over one-third of employees had observed harassment or bullying within their organisation and 21 percent had personally experienced harassment or bullying within the 12 months prior to the survey' (State Services Authority 2006: 1). Left unchecked, studies indicate exposure to systematic and long-lasting bullying at work is likely to contribute to a sick organisational workplace characterised by sporadic acts of abuse and violence (Arnetz and Arnetz, 2000; Timo, Fulop and Ruthjersen 2004; Cox and Goodman, 2005), low levels of job satisfaction and high rates of employee turnover (Tepper 2000; Vega and Comer, 2005). To counter these negative behaviours, it is

important researchers contribute to the ‘prevention and constructive management of these problems’ (Zapf and Einarsen, 2001: 371) by proposing interventions for helping managers recognise and manage psychological harassment at work. This paper proposes such an intervention tool and illustrates its usefulness with the aid of a single but complex case study. Before presenting the case study and processes for management intervention, psychological harassment is defined. To conclude, the paper considers some implications for management intervention and practice.

### **Defining Psychological Harassment**

Researchers use a variety of concepts to refer to psychological harassment since harassment encompasses both interpersonal and organisational phenomenon (Hoel *et al.* 2001). For instance, mobbing (Leymann 1996a), bullying (McCarthy *et al.* 2001; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper 2003), psychological violence and harassment (Di Martino *et al.* 2003), and emotional abuse at work (Keashly and Jagatic 2003) are terms widely used in the extant literature. Although researchers use different terms to convey harassment, all of the terms relate to persistent exposure to negative and aggressive behaviours of a primarily psychological nature that leads to a stigmatisation and victimisation of the target (Leymann 1990, 1996a; Einarsen *et al.* 2003).

In this paper, psychological harassment denotes negative psychological behaviours of a ‘derogatory or exclusionary nature reported by individual targets’ at work (Hoel *et al.* 2001: 462). It is the preferred term to bullying as the focus is on understanding the processes by which an individual is singled-out and victimised (Leymann, 1996a). According to Einarsen *et al.* (2003: 12), behaviour defined as psychological harassment occurs on a regular basis over the course of which the person ‘ends up in an inferior

position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts'. Sexual harassment is similar in nature to psychological harassment in that it refers to behaviour that explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, creates an intimidating or offensive work environment, and unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or (Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly 2005). However, sexual harassment refers explicitly to verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. By contrast, psychological harassment may include violence and emotional abuse of a non-sexual nature. Such negative acts include exposure to excessive teasing and sarcasm, insulting and humiliating remarks, ridicule, and the spreading of gossip and rumours (Leymann 1996a; Hoel *et al.* 2001). The actual nature and intensity of these acts are likely to be reflective of a hostile organisational climate (Vartia 1996; Einarsen 1999), and poor supervisory and leadership practices (Ashforth 1997; Tepper 2000).

Psychological harassment is a dynamic, complex and emotional process (Poilpot-Rocaboy 2006). Studies of psychological harassment have revealed its contingent antecedents and consequences (Ayoko, Callan and Hartel 2003; Salin 2003) and the temporal nature of the behaviour (Einarsen *et al.* 2003; Keashly and Jagatic 2003; Leymann 1990, 1996a). For example, studies suggest harassment may be more prevalent in specific occupational contexts such as health care (Arnetz and Arnetz, 2000; Timo *et al.* 2004) or universities (Cox and Goodman 2005) where clear status group differences exist within a hierarchical management structure. Indeed, a survey of the experiences of bullying in 70 organisations across Great Britain indicated bullying was primarily a top-down process with 74 per cent of targets exposed to harassment by a person in a managerial or supervisory capacity (Hoel *et al.* 2001).

## **A Case of Psychological Harassment**

The focal person of this case, Mr Duvin, is a human resource (HR) manager employed by a large Japanese high technology company situated in Rennes, France. Mr Duvin is a member of the French Association of Human Resource Managers (*Association Nationale des Directeurs et Cadres de la fonction Personnel, ANDCP*). In January 2002, Mr Duvin met the first author as part of a harassment in the workplace seminar hosted by the ANDCP. At this seminar, Mr Duvin mentioned a recent case of psychological harassment that had occurred in his organisation. In December 2001, Mr Duvin agreed to participate in the psychological harassment research program and share his observations and experiences of the case with the first author. Subsequently, Mr Duvin participated in four hours of audio-taped conversation at the University of Rennes. These semi-structured interviews (Wengraf, 2001) were intentionally designed to elicit his understanding of key events, individual and organisational responses related to the harassment case, and the individual and organisational effects of harassment. Consequently, the Interview Guide (see Table 1) was heavily structured around Poilpot-Rocaboy's (2006) four-phase model of psychological harassment. Data was analysed in respect to the interview questions – a sequence of harassment phases as presented in the Interview Guide.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 provides an edited version of the Duvin Case. The case shows how the HR manager is the focal point in responding to the complaints of harassment and deciding on the appropriate organisational response. To help managers such as Mr Duvin respond effectively to harassment complaints, a process of management intervention is required.

**Table 1**  
**Psychological Harassment Interview Guide**

Harassment Phase	Sample of Interview Questions
Reporting of harassment	How was harassment evoked? Who evoked harassment? When and why? How did harassment appear (actions, words, events)?
Harassment behaviour	Who is the alleged victim (gender, age, status, job, performance)? Who is the alleged perpetrator (gender, age, status, job, performance)? What is the work/organisational context (sector, industry, structure, culture, management style, working conditions)?
Responses to harassment	How did individuals respond (actions, information, sick leave etc.)? How did the organisation respond (sanctions, education, training etc.)?
Consequences of harassment	What were the individual effects (physical/mental health, family/social implications, economic effects)? What were the organisational effects (absenteeism costs, sick leave, turnover, lower job performance, strike action, sabotage)?

**Figure 1**  
**A Case of Psychological Harassment**

<b>The Duvin Case</b>
<p>For three years, Mr Duvin has been HR manager of a high-tech, Japanese Research and Development group located in Rennes, France. Mr Duvin manages a staff of 350 young (average age 29-30 years) and qualified professionals (mainly engineers). He is attached to the Group HR Director whose office is in Paris, and to the Site Director who is located in Rennes. The style of organisational leadership at this site is convivial. Use of the informal 'you' and 'free speech' are the norm. HR has a policy of continuous improvement of working conditions and contributing to a pleasant working environment.</p> <p>In December 2000, Ms Rex, a 25 year-old clerical assistant, asks to meet Mr Duvin. Ms Rex is the assistant of Mr Mache (27 years) who is in charge of the administrative department. Mr Mache supervises four women (including Ms Rex). Mr Duvin meets Ms Rex immediately. During the meeting, Ms Rex complains about Mr Mache's behaviour.</p>



She describes it as disrespectful and abnormal behaviour. She mentions derogatory remarks, made in front of the suppliers, regarding her performance: 'Your work is shit!'; 'you are worthless!' She recalls extremely offensive remarks about her clothes and indicates that the situation has worsened since she informed Mr Mache of her pregnancy. Ms Rex informs Mr Duvin that she plans to contact the works representative on the matter.

Mr Duvin discusses this complaint with the works representative and decides to meet Mr Mache for getting his point of view. Mr Mache denies showing disrespectful and abnormal behaviour towards Ms Rex. He states that Ms Rex had promised him not to become pregnant straight away (he regarded this as a moral commitment) and to inform him if she changed her mind. However, he had learned from others that she was still intending to have a child. Moreover, ever since her becoming pregnant, he notes that she does nothing at work, does not care about her duties and the company, only thinks about her private life, and 'twiddles her thumbs'. Mr Duvin asks him to change his attitude and to show Ms Rex some respect. Mr Mache promises to be more careful and to avoid this kind of behaviour.

Three weeks after the meeting with Mr Duvin, Ms Rex, who is regularly seen by a doctor because of an earlier miscarriage, takes sick leave. She returns to work but stops in April 2001. A few times before her first period of sick leave, Ms Rex informs Mr Duvin that the situation is still not good and asks to be transferred after her return to work. Ms Rex is replaced during her absence by another woman. This woman has no complaint with Mr Mache.

Three weeks before her return to work, Ms Rex asks to meet Mr Duvin. She informs him that she does not want to work again with Mr Mache and requests a position in a different department. Mr Duvin replies that it is not possible, at this time, to create a new position in another department. As a compromise, and after having spoken with Mr Mache, he suggests she remain in the same department but not in Mr Mache's room. Mr Duvin also offers her new responsibilities and a more varied range of job tasks. Mr Duvin assures her that Mr Mache's behaviour has greatly improved. Ms Rex accepts the offer all the while stating that she would have preferred to be transferred elsewhere. However, she understands the situation and thanks Mr Duvin for having found a workable solution.

One hour after her meeting, Ms Rex tries to call Mr Duvin. Mr Duvin is not available. He is informed by his assistant that Ms Rex was crying when she called. It turns out that Ms Rex had met her three colleagues after the meeting and had inquired about the department. Her colleagues informed her that Mr Mache said he had had a sexual relationship with her and that the baby she was expecting could be his. Ms Rex returns home crying, tries to reach Mr Duvin, as well as the works representative, the works inspector, the occupational physician and the health and security committee.

When Ms Rex meets with the occupational physician, the latter calls Mr Duvin. He informs him that Ms Rex is not able to work due to her psychological state. The physician asks Mr Duvin how long he needs to settle the conflict with Mr Mache so that

he can ascertain when Ms Rex will be able to return to work. Mr Duvin estimates that a three weeks waiting period is necessary.

Ms Rex does not want Mr Duvin to question her work colleagues. She informs him of their identities but does not want him to meet with them. So, Mr Duvin asks the works representative to investigate. The three work colleagues confirm their remarks but refuse to state them in writing. They are shocked and feel responsible for the deterioration of Ms Rex's state of health. They feel guilty to have started this 'whole mess'. They do not wish to elaborate further.

Later, Ms Rex returns to see Mr Duvin and informs him about actions and remarks he was not aware of. She evokes a series of behaviours and comments made with an abrupt and ironic tone. She recalls jokes, tendentious and sexual comments, and demeaning remarks such as when she bought a new car: 'but how can you pay for this kind of car with the position you have in the company?' She accuses Mr Mache of circulating rumours about a sexual relationship between them and categorically denies such a relationship ever existed. They just exchanged a friendly kiss during a party a few months ago. She states that at the beginning of her sick leave he would always call her at home under the pretext of needing information. In one instance, he reportedly called four times in one afternoon without any apparent valid reason.

Mr Duvin meets Mr Mache again together with the works representative and the site director. Mr Mache denies the accusations and asks if someone can corroborate them. In agreement with the group HR director, Mr Duvin plans to lay off Mr Mache. He thinks Mr Mache's behaviour as a supervisor sets a bad example and should not be tolerated. He considers that a sanction is essential because of the recurring nature of the problem.

However, the site director, who happens to be Mr Mache's supervisor, refuses to sanction him. He states that Mr Mache is a highly performing supervisor and wants to continue to work with him. He has a long-standing work relationship with him and he values his contributions. He admits knowing that Mr Mache's personality is a little 'off-putting' at times and difficult but it does not matter. Moreover, he mentions the lack of written evidence of the behaviours and remarks brought forth by Ms Rex and her colleagues. He emits the possibility that Ms Rex 'had made all of this up' in order to be transferred. He adds that Mr Mache had valid excuses because Ms Rex's complaint had put him in a precarious position and undermined his authority. In effect, Ms Rex's complaint explained and justified Mr Mache's abnormal behaviour and awkwardness.

Mr Duvin and the group HR director do not agree with this opinion. They think Mr Mache is not a high performing supervisor. Quite the contrary, he is very ambitious, proud yet lacking self-confidence, he is easily overloaded, he cannot organise his work, he cannot say 'no' when it is necessary, his 'buddy-buddy' style of leadership is flawed and when the results are lacking, he places the blame on his team.

After a new meeting with Mr Duvin, the group HR director and the site director, Mr Mache receives a written warning. Ms Rex is transferred to another department. Mr Duvin is very disappointed about this outcome which he regards as a mere 'slap on the wrist'.

## **A Process for Management Intervention**

Figure 2 presents a process tool to help managers identify, manage, and prevent psychological harassment at work. The intervention tool reflects distinct individual, organisational, and societal processes of psychological harassment as described in Poilpot-Rocaboy's (2006) model. The intervention tool requires managers to respond to four diagnostic questions:

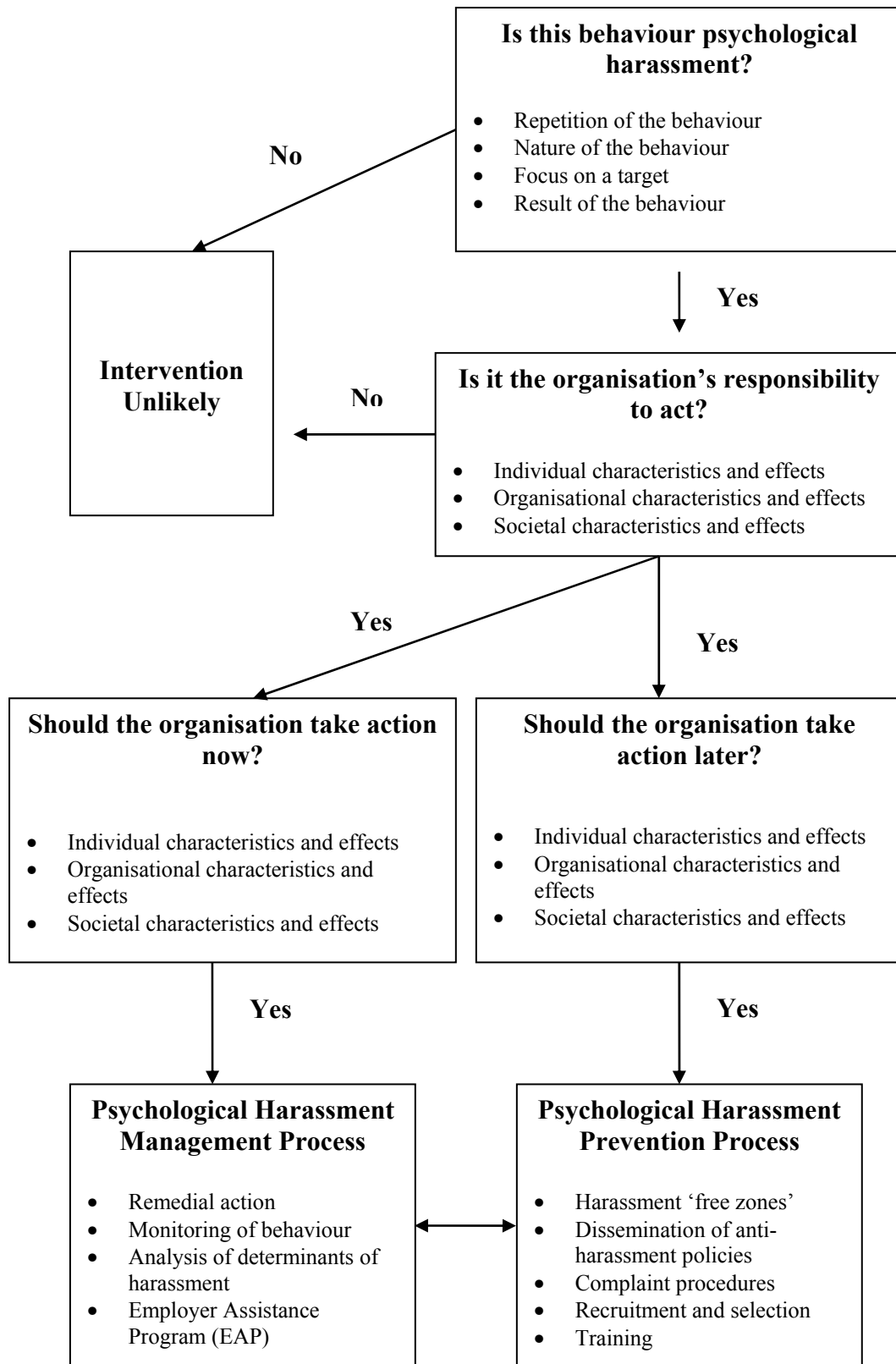
- Is this behaviour psychological harassment?
- Is it the organisation's responsibility to act?
- Should the organisation take action now?
- Should the organisation take action later?

By addressing these questions in a comprehensive manner, managers should be in a position to: (1) identify the psychological harassment behaviour, (2) decide whether to act or not, (3) develop a psychological harassment management process, and (4) develop a psychological harassment prevention process.

### ***Identifying psychological harassment behaviour***

A number of researchers have attempted to identify psychological harassment behaviour by defining the key characteristics of bullying (e.g., Leymann 1996a; Hirigoyen 2001; McCarthy *et al.* 2001; Einarsen *et al.* 2003; Keashly and Jagatic 2003; Poilpot-Rocaboy 2006). For instance, Einarsen *et al.* (2003: 6) note that 'bullying at work is about repeated actions and practices that are directed against one or more workers, that are unwanted by the victim, that may be carried out deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offence and distress, and that may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment'.

**Figure 2**  
**A process tool for identifying, managing and preventing psychological harassment at work**



Poilpot-Rocaboy (2006) summarises the bullying literature and lists four characteristics that distinguish psychological harassment from other counterproductive behaviours. Each characteristic is now defined.

#### *Repetition of the behaviour*

Psychological harassment refers to frequent negative acts or behaviour that endures over time (Leymann 1996a). The target person often reports unwelcome, unreciprocated and imposed actions by a person in a position of power (Hoel *et al.* 2001; Di Martino *et al.* 2003; Einarsen *et al.* 2003; Poilpot-Rocaboy 2006). In the Duvin case, Ms Rex makes a complaint in December 2000 against her boss and describes several repeated acts of harassment involving Mr Mache during the last three months. During Ms Rex's sick leave, Mr Mache continues to circulate rumours about Ms Rex. Allegedly, Mr Mache calls Ms Rex several times in one day without any apparent reason. The frequency and duration of these incidents are two important elements in identifying psychological harassment behaviour.

#### *Nature of the behaviour*

Psychological harassment is a negative and unwanted behaviour. It is behaviour directed toward individuals because of a situation of power imbalance (Einarsen *et al.* 2003). This imbalance of power often mirrors the formal authority structure of the organisation and serves to offend, humiliate, intimidate or undermine the person. Thus, recipients of harassment are likely to report negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and distress (Leymann and Gustaffson 1996) thus extending the scope of health, safety and well-being at work (Sparks, Faragher and Cooper 2001). In the Duvin case, Ms Rex's supervisor makes derogatory remarks about Ms Rex's

performance. He also informs her colleagues of a prior sexual relationship with Ms Rex and suggests he could be the father of her child. These unprovoked actions have a negative and unwanted psychological effect on Ms Rex's well-being – she takes sick leave, cries on more than one instance, and her distressed state is noticed by her colleagues.

#### *Focus on a target*

Psychological harassment is a process whereby hostile and aggressive behaviour is directed systematically at one or more colleagues or subordinates, leading to a stigmatisation and victimisation of the target. Mr Mache focuses on Ms Rex, the target of his derogatory remarks and sexual innuendos. It is interesting to note Mr Mache does not display the same behaviour with Ms Rex's colleagues or the woman that replaces Ms Rex during her period of sick leave.

#### *Result of the behaviour*

Psychological harassment creates many negative consequences. For the individual target, it can cause harm to their physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development (Di Martino *et al.* 2003; Einarsen and Mikkelsen 2003; Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen 2004). In the Duvine case, Ms Rex's well-being and confidence is harmed. She takes sick leave and expresses a strong desire not to work with Mr Mache. Mr Mache's behaviour also has an indirect negative effect on Ms Rex's colleagues – they are 'shocked' and express 'guilt' in respect to starting the 'whole mess'. Mr Mache's behaviour also ties up a myriad of people's time and energy most notably that of the HR manager, but also the works representative, the group HR director, the site director, the works inspector, the occupational physician, and the health and safety committee.

## **The Decision to Act**

After an initial investigation of the harassment behaviour, a manager should be in the position to: (1) determine if the complaint is psychological harassment or not, and (2) decide if and how the organisation should take action. If the behaviour is identified psychological harassment, then a manager faces the question: 'Is it the organisation's responsibility to act?' If the response is positive, the second and third process questions are 'should the organisation take action now?', or 'should the organisation take action later?' Figure 2 illustrates these process questions and indicates the decision to act depends upon three important elements:

1. Individual characteristics and effects (i.e., age, sex, race, and status of victim, perpetrator and decision maker; mental state and well-being of victim, victim's status and job performance)
2. Organisational characteristics and effects (i.e., culture, management/leadership style; duration of the harassment situation; structure of the organisation; effects of absenteeism, turnover intentions, performance, strike action)
3. Societal characteristics and effects (i.e., employment law, labour code, effects of/on the welfare system, societal costs).

Empirical studies suggest individual (Veale and Gold 1998; Hoel *et al.* 2001; Einarsen and Mikkelsen 2003), organisational (Vartia 1996; Ayoko *et al.* 2003; Djurkovic, McCormack and Casimir 2004; Nielsen *et al.* 2004) and societal (Vega and Comer 2005) characteristics account for differences in how individuals and organisations intervene and respond to psychological harassment. For instance, the HR manager's personality characteristics may play an important role in the decision to act

(George 1992). In the case, Mr Duvin reveals personality traits relating to emotional stability and conscientiousness (see Judge, Heller and Mount 2002) by showing a willingness to change the work design and offer Ms Rex new job responsibilities, more varied tasks, and a new room in which to work. In contrast, Mr Mache's actions are indicative of an unstable and narcissistic personality (Lubit 2002). He makes 'derogatory remarks' about her performance in front of suppliers, makes 'offensive remarks about her clothes', and allegedly circulates 'rumours about a sexual relationship' between himself and Ms Rex.

The decision maker's motivation to act will also be encouraged or constrained by the organisational culture and the support (or not) given by senior management (Einarsen 1999). Mr Duvin asks Mr Mache to 'change his attitude' and to 'show Ms Rex some respect'. Mr Duvin and the group HR director also plan to lay off Mr Mache as his *recurrent* behaviour as a supervisor has set 'a bad example' and therefore 'should not be tolerated'. Such actions indicate people management is a priority in this firm and personal respect is an essential element of the firm's culture. As such, Mr Mache's behaviour reflects poor 'person-organisation fit' (Cable and Judge, 1996) and thus there may be sufficient grounds for counselling and/or termination.

Although societal characteristics are not illustrated in this case, the existence (or not) of legal obligations concerning the protection of employee's health or safety at work may have influenced the decision to act. In France '*La Loi de Modernisation Sociale*' (Social Modernisation Law) of January 17<sup>th</sup> 2002 compels employers to develop actions to prevent harassment in firms (*Article L122-51 of Code du Travail*) and to protect the physical and mental health of employees (*Article L230-2*). In Australia, bullying is an



occupational health and safety (OHS) issue and thus firms are compelled to enact appropriate 'risk control/prevention' strategies under OHS guidelines to combat workplace bullying (Timo *et al.* 2004).

### **The Psychological Harassment Management Process**

An effective psychological harassment management process occurs when organisations act immediately and instruct designated agents to: (1) take remedial action, (2) monitor the behaviour of the victim and the perpetrator, (3) analyse the determinants of psychological harassment, and (4) develop Employer Assistance Programs (EAPs).

#### *Remedial action*

According to Bland and Stalcup (2001), the remedial action must be determined on a case-by-case basis and commensurate with the gravity of the facts. Remedial action can range in severity from a simple warning to redundancy for unacceptable behaviour. In the Duvin case, the first remedial action consisted of Mr Duvin asking Mr Mache to 'change his attitude and to show Ms Rex some respect'. It would seem this verbal caution was an insufficient sanction given Mr Mache continued to berate Ms Rex in his position as supervisor. Without a written warning from the outset, and some specific indication of the repercussions if identified behaviour persists, managers may easily dismiss such verbal warnings – particularly if those managers have the support of senior managers in the organisational hierarchy and no written evidence exists of the alleged behaviours over time.

Bland and Stalcup (2001) note it is always helpful to get the victim's desired remedy on the record as early as possible and to implement the desired remedy if it seems appropriate based on the investigation. Mr Duvin tried to act responsibly in this regard

by offering Ms Rex new job responsibilities and a more varied range of job tasks. However, he did not accede to Ms Rex's request for a transfer to another department and thus could not prevent her from experiencing continued acts of harassment.

#### *Monitoring of behaviour*

If after the remedial action both the victim and perpetrator remain employed, the department manager needs to monitor their behaviour on a continuous basis (Bland and Stalcup 2001; Bouche 2001). The manager should not only ensure the behaviour of the perpetrator has changed, but also that the person has not been alienated by the investigative process and its outcomes. For this to occur, the perpetrator should clearly understand *why* their behaviour is unacceptable. This may require the manager to solicit feedback from the perpetrator about the process and where appropriate, to propose appropriate coaching and training (Bouche 2001). The victim may also need follow-up contacts from HR personnel for several months to ensure the person is satisfied with the decision and is not experiencing any further difficulties.

#### *Analysis of the determinants of harassment*

Managing psychological harassment requires managers to analyse the determinants of harassment (during and after the investigation) and to change or mitigate them wherever possible. For example, changes to existing recruitment and existing staff appraisal processes may be necessary if the investigation finds these processes have any direct or indirect influence on the identified harassment behaviour. The analysis may reveal poor job/work design exacerbated the situation thus making it more likely for victimisation to occur. To create a more healthy work organisation, roles and tasks may need clarifying,

and rosters and work schedules made more flexible (Wilson, Dejoy, Vandenberg, Richardson and McGrath 2004).

#### *Employer assistance programs*

Victims of harassment may suffer deleterious psychological effects such as social isolation and the loss of self-confidence. These negative states may adversely affect victims' work performance. To counter these negative effects, European organisations assist victims through their EAPS. For example, the Belgium firm Mobistar offers a Team Member Assistance Program (TMAP) with a listening therapist to help victims (Poilpot-Rocaboy and Bonafons 2005). The RATP Metro Company (Paris) has created a centre for psychological support for victims of workplace violence (*Institut d'Accompagnement Psychologique Post-Traumatique*). Here, support is organised on two levels: (1) a hotline for immediate debriefing after a violent incident (this service operates on a 24/7 basis to ensure permanent accessibility), and (2) counselling services including experts on post-trauma treatment (Di Martino *et al.* 2003).

#### **The Psychological Harassment Prevention Process**

When an organisation decides to act later, a psychological harassment prevention process needs to be developed and the following measures prioritised (e.g., Bland and Stalcup 2001; Bouche 2001; Hirigoyen 2001; Poilpot-Rocaboy and Bonafons 2005).

#### *Harassment free zones*

Prevention works best when organisations mandate 'harassment free zones'. For this to happen, every HR department needs to establish a written anti-harassment policy, a written 'zero tolerance' policy prohibiting harassment in general (i.e., sexual harassment, racial harassment) and specifically psychological harassment. For example,

the US Department of Defence (Bland and Stalcup 2001), *Volkswagen* in Germany, *Dupont de Nemours France*, Air France, and Lausanne Town Council (Poilpot-Rocaboy and Bonafons 2005) have written anti-psychological harassment policies. These organisations define the concept, provide practical examples of types of conduct that constitute harassment, and inform stakeholders that such behaviours are unconscionable and perpetrators will be punished (sanctions, redundancy). In France ‘*La Loi de Modernisation Sociale*’ mandates an employer to establish a written anti-harassment policy and insert it in the regulations of the firm (*Article L122-34 of Code du Travail*).

#### *Dissemination of anti-harassment policies*

A wide dissemination of harassment policy among employees requires the posting of fliers in prominent locations throughout the workplace (Bland and Stalcup 2001). Good posting locations include employee break rooms, company bulletin boards, primary work areas, employee newsletters, and attachments to pay-slips. In the *Volkswagen* firm of *Wolfsburg* (Germany) or in the Town Council of Lausanne, each employee receives a written copy of the anti-harassment policy document. At Mobistar, the Intranet informs employees and supervisors of current harassment policy (Poilpot-Rocaboy and Bonafons 2005).

#### *Complaint procedures*

It is important managers create an environment in which employees feel comfortable in voicing issues of harassment. This requires designate persons to be established. Psychological harassment referents may be HR specialists (for example in *Dupont de Nemours*), other persons in the firm, or external persons. For example, the Town Council of Lausanne has designated internal voluntary employees. By contrast,

Mobistar appeals to external expertise (a team Member Assistance Program) (Poilpot-Rocaboy and Bonafons 2005). The work environment needs also to include mechanisms for facilitating grievance procedures such as established interview structures and complaint paper (Poilpot-Rocaboy and Bonafons 2005).

### *Recruitment and selection*

Recruitment and selection processes provide an opportunity for curtailing incivility (Glendinning 2001). HR managers in their recruiting and selection efforts can avoid the entrance of potential perpetrators. For example, interviewers can ask candidates to talk about their previous job, their good and bad work experiences, and relationships with supervisors, peers and subordinates. HR personnel should also spend time validating behavioural references from previous employers. Broad role descriptions consisting of job and performance expectations should spell out non-tolerated work behaviours.

### *Training*

Finally, all employees and managers need to receive training in psychological harassment policy. The training of HR managers, supervisors, employees, and psychological harassment referents ('Mr or Ms Psychological Harassment') should reiterate the organisation's policy prohibiting harassment (Bland and Stalcup 2001). The training might cover different topics, such as: (1) definitions of psychological harassment, (2) examples of psychological harassment cases, (3) definition of the process (antecedents, responses, effects), (4) the employer's policy, (5) the responsibilities of managers and supervisors for enforcement, (6) use of role-plays, and (7) use of post-training questionnaires. The aim of the training might be to increase people's skills and help them to detect and manage psychological harassment cases (Bland and Stalcup 2001; Hirigoyen 2001). Eyres (2005) argues this is best achieved by

mixing management and staff in the same program, obtaining support from the highest levels of management, using only qualified trainers, and video-taping the training sessions.

### **Implications for Practice**

The Duvin case study illustrates the dynamic, emotional and complex nature of psychological harassment. Mr Duvin, it seems, actively listened to Ms Rex's complaint, involved relevant others in the investigation, and attempted to find a workable solution for Ms Rex. However, the outcomes of psychological harassment (i.e., Ms Rex continues to be harassed and is transferred to another department; Mr Mache receives a written warning) suggest more could have been done to combat harassment if effective management and prevention processes had been in place. For instance, no anti-harassment policy existed in the firm so Mr Duvin could not counter the site director's arguments and his personal support for Mr Mache. Mr Duvin's organisational position of reporting to the site director, a 'long-standing' supervisor and friend of Mr Mache, also compounded the problem. Moreover, the lack of formal complaint procedures and training sessions made it difficult to challenge and discourage Mr Mache's behaviour. Finally, there was little follow-up after the final remedial action was taken. Nothing was organized to solicit feedback from Ms Rex and Mr Mache, no training was proposed to Mr Mache, and no analysis of the determinants of psychological harassment was made.

HR managers like Mr Duvin might be more effective at combating psychological harassment when they utilise the proposed intervention tool and ask process (diagnostic) questions in a systematic manner. Intervening in such a way suggests the following implications for manager practice. First, an effective intervention assumes managers

will investigate promptly the complaint that has been made (i.e., within 24 hours after a complaint is received). This implies investigators will establish all of the facts and come to a decision about whether the complaint is upheld, or not upheld, based on these facts (Merchant and Hoel 2003). To complete a systematic investigation process, the organisation may choose to rely on internal resources or resort to external expertise. In the case of using internal resources, the investigator may mobilise different internal services as works representatives, union trade services, health services, mediation services, and direction services (Richards and Daley 2003). However, if the organisation has little or no experience investigating bullying or harassment complaints, then an external investigator may be justified (Merchant and Hoel 2003). In the Duvin case, Mr Duvin mobilised internal resources. Perhaps an external investigator may have been more effective during the investigation in view of Mr Mache's supervisory position and personal relationship with the site director. The fact that an external specialist is able to dedicate time exclusively to an investigation may make the process more efficient and effective.

Second, the diagnostic tool requires managers to attend to record keeping. Managers need to be meticulous in documenting investigation procedures and recording interview notes with the victim, the perpetrator, and witnesses identified by either of them (Bland and Stalcup 2001). Such records may be electronically stored and password protected in an 'investigation file' separate from employee's personnel files. A diary containing dates and detailed information on the process will also help substantiate the facts of the case in the event of an appeal or legal action (Merchant and Hoel 2003). In the Duvin case, no mention is made of an investigation file relating to Mr Mache's behaviour. Such a file might have proved useful in countering the site director's argument that no

‘written evidence of the behaviours and remarks brought forth by Ms Rex and her colleagues’ existed. An investigation file would have formalised the harassment process and possibly convinced the site director to take notice of the gravity of Mr Mache’s alleged behaviour. Indeed, if Mr Duvin had made use of our proposed characteristics of harassment (repetition of the behaviour, nature of the behaviour, focus on a target, result of the behaviour) he would have been able to identify and name Mr Mache’s behaviour as psychological.

Third, the process tool compels managers to understand psychological harassment within the context of individual, organisational, and societal characteristics and effects. This context influences the decision to act as shown in the Duvin case. Mr Duvin strives to assert the respect of the person as an important element of the firm’s culture. However, the Site Director places more emphasis on the status, personality and performance of Mr Mache – individual characteristics that are paramount in the final decision to give Mr Mache a written warning. It would seem from this outcome the perceived performance of Mr Mache is more important a factor than the well-being of individual employees in this organisation. If this is indeed the case, Mr Duvin needed to codify these elements of organisation culture and use this document as the basis for designing a workable harassment management and prevention system.

Fourth, the process tool compels managers to prevent new cases of psychological harassment. In the Duvin case, no prevention process was developed and hence repeated acts of unacceptable managerial behaviour continued. An effective harassment prevention process requires managers to establish ‘zero-tolerance’ policies prohibiting psychological harassment, to circulate these policies to all members of the organisation,



to provide training in psychological harassment for all managers and employees, and to establish formal procedures to allow employees to complain about psychological harassment. Given existing budgetary responsibilities and the pressure to achieve results, line managers may find it easier to refer harassment complaints to the HR department and let them identify and characterise the alleged behaviour. However, the paper cautions against this approach. Managers should listen to victim's complaints and formally record the nature of the alleged behaviour before seeking external advice and support. Managers have a duty of care to their employees. As such, they should be aware of the nature of work relationships and factors in the immediate work environment that directly or indirectly influence harassment behaviour.

## **Conclusions**

The proposed intervention tool represents a useful guide for managers dealing with an employee's psychological harassment complaints. As a diagnostic device, it helps identify the nature of harassment behaviour and alerts managers to the importance of the situational context in determining the effects of harassment and the decision to act. However, these benefits can only be realised if managers have the time, the analytical and emotional competencies, and the necessary support from senior management to stand back and systematically analyse the situation. Managers cannot face the situation alone as the Duvin case has shown. They need the support of senior managers, works representatives, occupational physicians, and HR specialists. Combating psychological harassment in the workplace is a collective not an individual responsibility.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The case study methodology was *not* employed as a form of data analysis (i.e., open coding, axial coding, thematic analysis). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and sent to Mr Duvin for his comment and approval. Mr Duvin made minor changes to the initial transcripts and approved a second transcription of the conversation. This transcription was edited into a sequence of harassment phases in order to illustrate how harassment events and behaviours unfold over time.

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